DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 224 579 PS 013 247

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TITLE The Supersuit: An Example of Structured Naturalistic Observation of Children's Altruism.
PUB DATE May 82
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association (44th, Minneapolis, MN, May 6-8, 1982).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Altruism; Classroom Observation Techniques; Early Childhood Education; Incidence; *Interpersonal Competence; Peer Relationship; *Preschool Children; Research Methodology
IDENTIFIERS Dyadic Interaction Analysis; *Helping Behavior; *Naturalistic Observation

ABSTRACT

Observations in a neighborhood day care center revealed that teachers, when they handed out a "paint shirt" without fastening it, set up a situation in which children helped one another. With modifications, this naturally occurring situation was used in order to increase the incidence of peer helping behavior so that it could be studied naturalistically. The modifications structuring the setting were as follows: a "superperson suit" similar to a paint shirt (a blue smock with a red star on the chest, fastened with a large button and buttonhole at the back of the neck) was introduced to the children as a new toy. The opportunity to wear the superperson suit was determined by a random drawing of children's names; each time a name was drawn, the teacher would set a timer, place the suit on the child's front with the straps over the shoulders, and say quietly that she was too busy to button it. Videotaping began at this point. The child was allowed to enter free play and either continue to hold the superperson suit on in front, solicit help, or attempt to button the suit by himself or herself. Each child's turn lasted 4 minutes. Videotapes were coded in terms of several categories of donor and recipient behaviors. Additionally, peer ratings and peer nominations were obtained from each child. In 3.13 hours of observation, the structured naturalistic observation method yielded 56 opportunities to help, 32 instances of spontaneously offered help, and 13 instances of recipient prompted help, a substantial increase over the average rate of helping (less than once per hour) reported in unstructured naturalistic settings. (RH)

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The Supersuit: An Example of Structured Naturalistic Observation of Children's Altruism

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Running Head: Structured Naturalistic Observation

The authors would like to thank Esther Thelen for her generous loan of videotape equipment. Videotape for this study was funded by the University of Missouri-Columbia Research Council. Reprints can be obtained from Lizette Peterson, Psychology Department, 210 McAlester, University of Missouri-Columbia, Columbia, Missouri 65211

Abstract

A structured, naturalistic observational method of eliciting helping utilized a "superperson suit" which needed to be fastened by a day care center classroom peer. This method produced a high number of opportunities to help, spontaneous offers of help, and recipient prompted help. There was little evidence of peer reinforced help or reciprocal help. Children with high general social competence ratings provided a disproportionate amount of both spontaneous and prompted helping. The future utility of this method is suggested.

The Supersuit as a Structured Naturalistic Observation of Children's Altruism

Researchers have repeatedly noted that field observations must be employed in addition to laboratory studies to establish the validity of laboratory work (e.g., Bandura & Walters, 1963; Hoffman, 1970). However, few naturalistic observations have yielded a detailed analysis of children's altruism, probably because children's helping and sharing occurs so infrequently. For example, Murphy (1937) observed children for 216 hours and observed less than one altruistic act per hour. Recently, in one of the few naturalistic studies to be attempted, Strayer, Rushton, and Wareing (1979) used videotape to provide sensitive measures of altruism, and behavioral sequences were repeatedly viewed to capture even subtle instances of altruism. This study, in striking similarity to the research of the 1930's, found an average of only .94 helping activities per hour. These researchers reported that they were unable to perform a complete dyadic analysis of helping, primarily because it occurred so infrequently.

Weick (1965) has suggested a cost effective compromise method, the use of a structured naturalistic observation. This method relies on the use of a real world situation which is structured to yield higher than usual rates of a target behavior. Researchers in children's altruism have not yet fully explored the potential of this method. The present study utilized the videotaping of a structured, naturalistic situation to provide a richer, more complete analysis of children's helping than would have been possible in past research. The study is offered both as a preliminary report of some of the natural determinants of children's giving and receiving of help as well as an example of this useful research methodology.

Method

Subjects and Observers

All of the regularly attending students (four girls and seven boys, mean age 5.7) in one neighborhood day care center classroom participated during a five week summer session.

Two women, one undergraduate and one graduate student who were blind to experimental hypotheses, rated the videotaped interactions of the children.

Procedures

Observation of naturally occurring forms of helping suggested that occasionally teachers set up a circumstance for helping when they hand out a "paint shirt" without fastening it, and children help one another by buttoning the shirt. This naturally occurring sequence of events was selected as structure for the naturalistic observation in the present study.

On the first day of participation, the teacher announced during the morning free play session that she had a new toy for the children to play with, a "super-person suit." This suit, she explained fit over the front of one's clothes and fastened with a large button and buttonhole at the back of the neck. (Pre-testing with children in a separate preschool classroom suggested that children who were 4 years of age and older could easily fasten the button for others but not for themselves.) The "supersuit" was a smock of royal blue broadcloth with a red satin star in the middle of the chest. The teacher explained that she wanted everyone to have a chance to wear it. Thus, everyone's name would be put in a jar and each name would be drawn randomly, one at a time. Then, the teacher would set a timer allowing the child to have a 4 minute turn with the "supersuit."

Each time a child's name was drawn, the teacher would set the timer and then would place the suit on the child's front with the straps over the shoulders, but she would note quietly to the child that she was too busy to button it up.

Videotaping began at this point. The teacher then busied herself with classroom materials. The child was then allowed to enter free play and either continue to hold the shirt on in front, solicit help, or attempt to help him or herself.

Several weeks after the last session, a separate experimenter who had not participated in the videotaping administered a peer rating of general social competence described by Gresham (1981). Each child rated each peer in the class in terms of how much the child liked to play and work with the peer, which peers were the child's three best friends, the three people the child would most like to play with and most like to work with. A 1 (frowning face, don't like to play or work with) to 5 (smiling face, really like to play or work with) scale was used for the ratings. Both the peer ratings and the peer nominations resulted in substantially the same rankings of social competence.

Observations

Two observers independently rated all of the videotapes in terms of donor behaviors such as spontaneous helping, prompted helping, and refusing to help, and recipient behaviors such as requesting help, refusing to accept help, rewarding the donor for helping, ignoring the donor, punishing the donor, or helping oneself. The observers largely agreed (effective percentage agreement range 85%-96%, mean 91% agreement) on these categories.

Results and Discussion

The clearest result which emerged from this field study was that the structured, naturalistic observation method produced the predicted higher rate of helping than would ordinarily occur in a day care classroom. In 3.13 hours of observation, there were 56 opportunities to help, 32 instances of spontaneously offered help and 13 instances of recipient prompted help. This is quite an increase over the average of less than once-per-hour rate of helping reported in

unstructured naturalistic settings (e.g., Murphy, 1937; Strayer et al., 1979), yet the task was one commonly present in this and similar preschool classrooms.

In addition, this methodology allowed for the more complete dyadic analysis of helping which had been noted to be important but lacking from past naturalistic observations (Strayer et al., 1979). Such an analysis leads to confirmation of suggestions from both analogue and naturalistic studies that children rarely reinforce one another for altruism. For example, there were only six instances of positive consequences for helping in the 56 helping opportunities. There were predominantly neutral consequences for helping (i.e., the child who had received help simply walked away). However, there were actually slightly more negative consequences (for example, "go away" and shove in response to another child's attempt to help fasten the suit) than positive consequences for helpgiving.

There was also surprisingly little reciprocity in helping, particularly since past analogue research has suggested that children of this age are strongly influenced by considerations of reciprocity of help (Peterson, Hartmann, & Gelfand, 1977) and since the opportunities for helping occured in close temporal proximity. There were only five examples of positive reciprocity (for weeks 1-5, there were 2, 1, 1, 0, and 1 respective instances of reciprocal helping) and one example of reciprocal refusal by the recipient (e.g. "You wouldn't let me help you, so I won't let you help me"). There were no examples of reciprocal refusal by the donor.

The factor which most clearly predicted helping was peer ratings of social competence. The two boys and one girl (27% of the total sample of children) who received clearly the highest general social competence ratings served as donors for 43% of the overall helping episodes, for 77% of the opportunities in which help was requested, and in 80% of the reciprocal helping instances. Unlike other children (see Table 1) these children never had their offers for help

Insert Table 1 about here

refused, and only one incident of self helping involved one of these high competent children. They also demonstrated the greatest sensitivity to or influence on the determinants of helping, decreasing their spontaneous helping most abruptly (from 8 in the first session to 2, 0, 1, and 1 in subsequent sessions) at the time that the requests for help and self-help emerged.

Table 1 shows the different kinds of dyadic influence in helping. As can be seen, spontaneous offers by the donor typically accounted for the highest rate of interaction, although it dropped to lower rates in weeks 2-4. The degree to which offers by the donor were accepted or refused was also influenced by weekly sessions. Only in week 2 was there a substantial amount of refusal of help by recipients. Requests for help became more common as spontaneous helping decreased and dropped off as spontaneous helping increased again. There was a low level (0 or 1 per session) of donors who refused to help when asked and after the first session there was, unfortunately, a steady number of children who preferred to help themselves, even though this was very difficult to do. Perhaps with the emphasis placed upon self-care, being able to dress oneself, etc., it is not surprising that this behavior emerged. Furthermore, a modeling effect was observed whereby children learned how to fasten the button themselves by observing other children engage in a novel form of self-help by turning the suit around, fastening the button in front, then turning the suit around again so the button was in back as the suit was naturally worn. Future research utilizing the structured, naturalistic method might continue to attempt to find a task which a donor can easily complete (so that motor competence is not confounded with other variables), which is not too far from naturally occuring tasks, and yet which the recipient cannot complete for him or herself.

The fluctuations from week to week across the categories of behavior appeared to be the function of the type of ongoing activity selected by the nonrecipient members of the group. Since a setting as natural as possible was desired, children

continued to be free to select their own type of activity, and this did differ across sessions. Although with observational data, no causal conclusions can be reached regarding the source of the fluctuations in altruism, laboratory data would suggest that as cost of helping (leaving one's ongoing activity) increases, spontaneous helping should decrease. This appeared to be the case in the present study.

The current subject sample is too small for definitive conclusions regarding normative behavior for this age group to be reached. However, the present data provide some naturalistic data which support laboratory studies suggesting the importance of social competence of the donor and they replicate other naturalistic findings of the low rate of donor reinforcement by the recipient. On the other hand, these findings also suggest that although children may be influenced by reciprocity considerations in some settings, there is less reciprocity in the classroom setting than would be expected from previous research. Ginsburg and Miller (1981) report similar findings for playground activities. The data on refusals to both give and accept help is also relatively novel and deserves further investigation. However, the most important contribution of the present data may be the clear demonstration of the utility of a structured naturalistic observation method to yield higher rates of altruism in a real-world setting. Even with the current small sample size, it is clear that both spontaneous and recipient prompted helping occurred at a much higher rate than is typical of preschool classroom settings. This method may allow increased understanding of dyadic interactions in naturally occurring altruism in future field studies.

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Table 1

Helping*	Week				
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Spontaneous, Unsolicited offers By Donor Accepted By Recipient	13	4	2	4	9
Spontaneous Offers By Donor Refused By Recipient	1	4	1	0	0
Requests for Help By Recipient Delivered By Donor	0	4	2	5	2
Requests for Help By Recipient Refused By Donor	1	1	0	1	2
Children Helping Themselves	1	4	4	3	3
Number of Recipients	10	9	8	10	9

*These categories can sum more or less than the total number of children since sometimes the button became undone and required refastening, and other times some children refused to participate as recipients.